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ABSTRACT

This paper reports one attempt to study and work toward the resolution of conflict in an inner city school. Specifically, this investigation was concerned with resolving conflict between students and teachers in an urban school by attempting to: (1) establish effective communication between these groups; and (2) improve understanding so that mutual problems could be resolved. With respect to problems of communication and understanding, the results indicate: (1) effective communication was established through use of a tape recording exchange procedure; (2) the levels of agreement and understanding between students and teachers were initially high and remained high throughout the investigation; and (3) the basis for existing disagreement was identified in terms of differential cue weighting. It was deemed that the ability to identify the precise basis of the existing disagreement directly led to the implementation of a program which substantially improved relations between students and teachers in this particular setting. (Author/TA)

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THE ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL UNDERSTANDING IN DE-POLARIZATION OF ANTAGONISTIC GROUPS[1]

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Attempts to achieve racial and ethnic balance in urban public schools have resulted in crisis situations throughout the country. Divisive qualities inherent in techniques such as "busing" and "open enrollment" have led to polarization and increased antagonism between community groups. Intransigence straddles social and economic strata with a poisonous miasma. And young people in the nation's schools bear the brunt of this political-educational fiasco. Exploitation and de-humanization are the inevitable consequences of existing racist practices. The schools themselves have become a battleground for conflicting groups. But little has been done to address problems of conflict in the schools, let alone the more basic societal problems underlying such conflict.

This paper reports one attempt to study and work toward the resolution of conflict in an inner-city school. Specifically, this investigation was concerned with resolving conflict between students and teachers in an urban school by attempting to 1) establish effective communication between these groups and 2) improve understanding so that mutual problems could be resolved.

Although the specific circumstances of local "school problems" vary, there are consistencies characteristic of most, if not all, such situations.

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Our television screens and newspapers point these out only too well. Young people, failing to understand the bases for existing conflicts, suffer and turn to maladaptive escapes in their attempt to handle frustrations. At the same time, insensitive adults, operating under rubrics of progressivism, liberalism, etc. parade ineffectual "traditional skills" with little substantive effect in the schools. At the same time, they fail to understand why the students are increasingly disenchanted with their efforts. Indeed, it is often the mutual lack of understanding which is central to conflict in school situations. But what is the basis for such misunderstanding?

Educational practices, traditionally successful in white middle class schools, have failed to enthuse, or inform non-white non-middle class students! Increasing numbers of young people are being "turned off" by the schools and find themselves adrift in a technological society ill-equipped to compete in the labor market and ill-prepared to handle their frustrations. While the failure of teachers to meet the needs of these students is, in most cases, unintentional, students nevertheless view teachers as insensitive to their needs and unresponsive to their unique, individual situations. In short, many teachers' performance is perceived as irrelevant for the students. As stated more bluntly by a student participating in the study reported here, "the teachers don't give a shit"! Teacher's are seen as 1) not wanting to spend extra time to become acquainted with their students, 2) prejudiced against blacks and chicanos, and 3) having money as their main motivation to work.

On the other hand, teachers view the students as 1) apathetic and unmotivated, 2) lacking in self-discipline and self-control, and 3) having too many interests in matters unrelated to academic achievement. In short, both students and teachers fail to understand the nature of the "other's"

way of thinking about the school situation. This lack of understanding, is central to conflict between students and teachers in school settings. Yet most attempts at problem-solving in school situations have ignored this crucial characteristic. Further, neither an appropriate conceptual framework nor effective methodological techniques have been suggested.

In the investigation reported here, a conceptual framework, the lens model paradigm, previously applied in other community settings is utilized along with techniques for establishing communication and increasing understanding between students and teachers. Specifically, we attempted to improve relations between students and teachers by 1) establishing effective communication between these groups, 2) increasing mutual understanding, and 3) facilitating the development of joint student-teacher programs which deal directly with the basic problems in the school.

METHOD

The basic method used in this investigation is the interpersonal learning paradigm developed by Hammond, Wilkins, and Todd (1966). (See also Bergner and Miller, 1969; Miller, 1970; Miller, 1971.) In applying this paradigm in a community setting, Miller (1971) has represented conflict situations as a joint function of agreement and understanding between persons. That is, parties to a conflict may agree with one another or not, and may or may not understand the thinking of the other party. Thus, in principle, at least four different types of conflict situations are postulated (see Miller, 1971, for further detail.). In the present situation, it is hypothesized that greater agreement between students and teachers exists than might be expected, but this is not seen due to the absence of understanding. Utilizing the interpersonal model paradigm, it is possible to evaluate both agreement and understanding in a sufficiently rigorous manner

so that not only can existing levels of understanding and agreement be determined, but more important, the steps required to improve matters are suggested by this analysis.

In addition, the tape exchange procedure (see Miller, 1970; 1971; Miller and Davies, 1971) was used as a means of establishing communication between students and teachers. This technique is described in more detail below.

Procedure

The primary participants in this investigation were a group of seven students and a group of seven teachers in an inner-city junior high school. The members of each group were representative of the overall populations of students and teachers in the school in terms of age, ethnic background, etc. The procedure consisted of four stages: 1) a pre-test stage; 2) communication through the exchange of tape recordings; 3) presentation of feedback information based upon the pre-test; and 4) a post-test stage. Each of these is discussed below.

Pre-test evaluation. In this stage of the investigation, all participants were asked to make a series of judgments about the quality of 25 hypothetical junior high schools. Participants were told that the schools were similar except with respect to the information presented to them. Participants were shown a series of 5 x 8 cards containing four facts about each school. These cards presented the following information: 1) participation of teachers in recreational activities; 2) recognition of racial and ethnic balance; 3) ability of teachers to inform and motivate; and 4) students' participation in curriculum planning. These "cues" were presented in the form of bar graphs with values ranging from one to ten. Each participant rated the quality of each school on a scale ranging from

1 to 20 with 1 indicating extremely poor quality, and 20 indicating excellent quality. After making their judgment, participants were asked to predict what value would be assigned to that school by the members of the other group. Thus, each student predicted what the teachers would say and each teacher predicted what the students would say. This was done for each of the 25 cards.

Tape exchange procedure. Following the pre-test, the group of students constructed a tape recording directed at the teachers. The students were free to make any comments they wished or, ask any questions they wished of the teachers. This tape was then played for the teachers who listened and constructed a tape in reply. This exchange continued until a total of seven tape recordings had been exchanged between the two groups. (See Miller and Davies, 1971, for further discussion of the tape exchange procedure.)

Feedback about judgments and predictions. At a point midway through the exchange of tape recordings, all participants were presented information about their performance during the pre-test. Specifically, the participants were given graphic and verbal information about 1) their accuracy in predicting the judgments of the other group, 2) their use of the four cues in making their own judgments, and 3) information about which cues showed the greatest discrepancies between a) the predictions they made of the members of the other group and b) the actual judgments of the other group. This information was presented to the participants on two separate occasions.

Post-test evaluation. Upon completion of the exchange of tape recordings, the procedure used during the pre-test was again used to evaluate the judgments and predictive ability of the participants.

In addition to the procedure stages described above, preliminary

interviews were conducted with the participants and other students, teachers, and administrators in the school to determine the nature of the conflict in the school and which type of judgmental issues (criterion and cues in the task) would be most appropriate. Upon completion of the post-test, additional face-to-face meetings were desired by the members of both groups to continue discussion of implementation of projects which might improve the school situation.

RESULTS

Establishment of Communication

For this investigation to be successful, it is essential that effective communication be established through the exchange of tape recordings. Establishment of criteria for effective communication is difficult under any circumstances, yet it seems clear that in the present case effective communication was established. This is evidenced first by the substantive content of the tapes, in particular, the frank exchange between students and teachers. Second, the attention paid to the tape recordings made by the other group further indicated the effectiveness of the communication. Third, the frequency of direct responses to specific questions asked by other members of the group, and the continuity of discussion during the course of the exchange of tapes further indicated the utility of the communication. Finally, a number of comments made by the participants after the completion of the exchange also indicated that the communication was effective. Thus, our first aim, establishment of effective communication, was accomplished.

Interpersonal Understanding

Table 1 shows the level of predictive accuracy for both groups before and after the exchange of tape recordings and presentation of feedback. Predictive accuracy is measured by the correlation between the actual

judgments of one party and the predictions made about that party by the other. Surprisingly, both groups were quite accurate in their predictions of one another prior to the beginning of the tape exchange. Further, the level of accuracy remained high for the teachers and became slightly higher for the students although this increase was not statistically reliable. However, given the initial high levels of accuracy and the accompanying statistical constraints, any increase in accuracy is of interest.

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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In general, then, the level of interpersonal understanding between members of these groups was high initially and remained high through the course of the investigation.

Judgmental Agreement

Table 1 also shows the levels of agreement in judgments between members of these groups before and after the exchange of tape recordings, and indicates that a substantial high level of agreement existed before and after the exchange of tape recordings. As in the case of predictive accuracy, the opportunity for increases in agreement are limited by the initially high level. (Some question also exists as to the appropriateness of investigators attempting to achieve further agreement in such a setting.)

Although agreement was reasonably high initially and remained so, it is important to determine the basis of any systematic disagreement which exists. This is accomplished by examination of differences in the use of the information presented about the hypothetical schools for the teachers and the students. Table 2 shows the average weighting of each of the four cues for both teachers and the students during the post-test evaluation.

This indicates that while there is considerable similarity in use of two of the cues, the primary differences occur with respect to differential use of Cues 2 and 3, recognition of racial and ethnic balance, and the ability of teachers to inform and motivate. Not surprisingly, the teachers weighted Cue number 3 most heavily with a significantly lower weighting for Cue number 2. The students, however, placed primary emphasis on Cue number 2, although they also showed substantial weighting for Cue number 3. Thus, the basis of existing disagreement is identified precisely and the requirements for reduction of disagreement are indicated.

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Insert Table 2 about here.

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DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation have implications with respect to both 1) evaluation of the levels of understanding and agreement between students and teachers, and 2) the social consequences of the investigation for conflict in the school. These are discussed in turn.

With respect to problems of communication and understanding, the results indicate: 1) communication was established through use of the tape exchange procedure; 2) the levels of agreement and understanding between the students and teachers were initially high and reamined high throughout the investigation; and 3) the basis for existing disagreement was identified in terms of differential cue weighting. Identification of the basis of existing disagreement provides support for the utility of the conceptual framework employed, that is, the interpersonal learning paradigm. It is clear that application of this paradigm and its accompanying analytical methods (i.e., the lens model equation) allows precise identification of the locus of

conflict and consequently, suggests what approach is needed to attain conflict reduction. Further, the task-relevant feedback provided to participants, also derived from this paradigm, allowed a graphic representation of the specific ways in which these individuals make judgments about the issues involved.

An additional implication of the results concerns the relation of the findings to the schematization of conflict discussed above. Clearly, the present situation is a case where there is agreement and understanding between persons, even though many would intuitively judge such a situation to be otherwise, that is, one might assume extensive disagreement. It should be noted that identification of existing agreement and disagreement are both important requirements for the analysis and resolution of such conflict.

While the data support the utility of the conceptual framework and methods used in this investigation, the implications for change and modification of conflict situations are at least equally important. Clearly, it is essential that situations which are no longer relevant nor responsive to people's needs must be altered. A direct result of this investigation was the development of a course in ethnic cultures meeting credit requirements in social studies, which was incorporated into the school's regular curriculum. More specifically, as a result of the communication via the tapes and subsequent productive face-to-face meetings, the students and teachers felt that it was essential to deal with the problem of recognizing racial and ethnic differences within the schools in a direct, constructive way. Consequently, these individuals jointly developed the idea of a course designed to be taught by black and chicano students for anglo teachers which would deal with the issue graphically demonstrated to be the source of conflict in the school. The graphic evidence derived from the data

played a major role in the development of this specific project. More important, however, is the fact that the decision to implement this program was made through the joint efforts and planning of the students and teachers, and was viewed by all as a means of addressing one of the most salient problems in the school. Other joint projects, of course, were developed as a consequence of the investigation. It is significant, however, that the ability to identify the precise basis of the existing disagreement directly led to the implementation of a program which has substantially improved relations between students and teachers in this particular setting. The implications for utilization of these techniques in other types of conflict settings are extensive.

Table 1

		Pre-test	Post-test
Predictive Accuracy	Students	.52	.62
	Teachers	.53	.49
Agreement		.60	.55

Mean predictive accuracy and mean agreement between students and teachers before and after exchange of tapes.

Table 2

	1 Recreational Programs	2 Racial and Ethnic Balance	3 Teacher's Ability	4 Student's Role
Students	.30	.41	.46	.05
Teacher's	.25	.27	.69	.05

Mean weights for each of the four cues for students and teachers during the post-test.